

**My Witness Is the Empty Sky:
Journeys of the Beat Generation**

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Abstract

My Witness Is the Empty Sky: Journeys of the Beat Generation is a piece of travel writing and ficto-critical writing, aiming to combine historical information with creative work. In this way it tells the story of the Beat Generation in various world-wide locations, concentrating on the life of the writer Jack Kerouac and his relationship with each city. The novel takes its title from *The Dharma Bums*, a book Kerouac wrote in 1958 detailing the rise of the Beat Generation in San Francisco and New York.¹ It includes a chapter set in San Francisco, adapted from a piece that was submitted as an Honours thesis three years ago.

Kerouac's 'Rules for Spontaneous Prose' are thirty short phrases dictating his preferred method of writing style and the sources of inspiration behind his work.² They describe a way of writing that includes very little punctuation and grammar, is composed spontaneously and is strongly influenced by the author's life and surroundings. These rules were used as a guideline for writing the novel, so that some of the energy and style of Kerouac's work is reflected in the narrative. The author often slips into spontaneous ramblings or drifts off into random tangents, just as Kerouac demonstrated in his books. Kerouac had a strong belief that the first copy of something written shouldn't be changed or edited.³ Obviously this was not an appropriate action for writing this novel, but great care was taken to ensure that the spirit of Beat writing was maintained in

¹ Kerouac, Jack *The Dharma Bums*, London, Harper Collins, (1958) 1994.

² Kerouac, Jack *Heaven and Other Poems*, San Francisco, Grey Fox Press, 1959, p. 46.

³ Campbell, James *This is the Beat Generation*, London, Vintage, 2000, p. 262.

the text. For example, in the San Francisco chapter, a brief paragraph utilising the language particular to the Beat Generation is a way of capturing some of the spirit of the time and demonstrating how the language was used. Although it is over the top and exaggerated, this paragraph is designed to be rhythmical and poetic and reflect the spontaneous prose Kerouac is so famous for.

Jack Kerouac used the character Jack Duluoz in a selection of his novels that deal with his life up until 1965. He called these books *The Duluoz Legend* and aimed to have them eventually published as one big book. There is no doubt that Jack Duluoz is Jack Kerouac and other Beat Generation figures feature under pseudonyms as well. Just as much of the Beat Generation's writing and poetry are semi-autobiographical and self-indulgent, this story uses the author's own experiences whilst travelling around the world to convey aspects of the history and personalities behind a particular literature movement. Just as in *The Duluoz Legend*, the author is also the main character in the novel.

The other characters in *My Witness Is the Empty Sky* are always on the peripheral. In Kerouac's semi-autobiographical novels, he observed and described the people whom he met on his journeys. Apart from the select few who warranted it, most of these characters were under-developed and shallow. *My Witness Is the Empty Sky* reflects this by revealing very little about the other characters. For example, The Boy is Stella's link to home and Australia and obviously an important factor in her life, however, nothing significant about him is revealed. Just like Jack Duluoz, Stella is the main character in this book and nothing is allowed to detract from that.

The remnants of this movement in today's society are uncovered as the author visits the Beat Hotel, Beat-related festivals and the former residences of Beat Generation writers. This bears a resemblance to the work of Chris Challis in his 1984 novel *Quest for Kerouac*, who re-told Kerouac's most popular novel *On The Road*, by taking the same route the book portrays and exploring the contemporary surroundings. By describing the physical aspects of the places visited and then comparing them to the places portrayed in the novel, Challis' work is not so much about discovery, but clarification.⁴

In this case, the structure of the novel reflects the style and structure of Kerouac's *Lonesome Traveler*, in which the main character Jack Duluo travels in San Francisco, Mexico, Tangier, Paris and New York. In *My Witness is the Empty Sky*, Stella travels a similar route to Jack Duluo's, with the ghost of Jack Kerouac for company. In the end she travels to Kerouac's home town of Lowell, Massachusetts to lay the ghost to rest. The chapters dealing with the life of the Beat Generation in San Francisco, Paris, New York and Lowell are somewhat longer than the other two chapters, in accordance with the importance of these cities to Kerouac. On the other hand, the chapters set in Mexico City and Tangier offer the opportunity to explore the life and writing of people other than Jack Kerouac, such as William Burroughs. Kerouac does not feature until the very end in the Tangier chapter as, unlike Burroughs, his relationship with that particular city was not vital to his work. The chapter set in Mexico City is of a differing style from that of the others to reflect the lyrical, spontaneous poetry that Kerouac created in that city and the sometimes erratic nature of his writing.

⁴ Challis, Chris *Quest for Kerouac*, London, Faber and Faber Ltd, 1984.

The chapters are constructed, like those in *Lonesome Traveler*, as individual narratives.

The Beat Generation, which includes writers such as Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs and Gregory Corso, was famous for an unsavoury lifestyle which included promiscuous sex and drug experimentation. In the novel, the main character, Stella, drinks and takes drugs with Kerouac and sometimes by herself. She makes a decision to explore everything Beat and this pastime is one more thing that needs to be investigated. The drugs often open up a world that was previously unavailable to Stella; in New York she gets stoned with Kerouac in a hotel room and witnesses the creation of one of the most famous Beat poems, *Pull My Daisy*⁵, by Kerouac, Ginsberg and Neal Cassady. In Mexico City, she is drunkenly able to watch as Burroughs kills his wife Joan. Just as Beat Generation writers used their environment as a source of inspiration and often wrote under the influence of narcotics or alcohol, certain scenes were created under unusual conditions to convey a particular atmosphere and mood.

Kerouac is the major focus of the novel. He is the one member of the Beat Generation with whom Stella is able to interact during her travels. He appears during significant moments all over the world to aid her in her quest to find everything Beat. Throughout all the visits to abandoned accommodations and torn-down bars, he is the one link to the Beat Generation that keeps her on track. When she is disillusioned by the consumerist nature of a conference in his honour, he appears to take her out for a hamburger. At the same time, he is a destructive force and lost man who clings to Stella because she is his

⁵ Kerouac, Jack *Scattered Poems*, San Francisco, City Lights Books, 1970.

only link to the modern world. The character of Jack Kerouac has been carefully constructed by Stella's mind, based on his writing. Kerouac's dialogue is constructed mainly from interview quotes, poems, letters or lines out of his novels. In this way, his personality, feelings and sentiments are captured and he is more real. Just as Stella did, this novel wanted to create a character out of Kerouac, and is a character constructed on the basis of his own writing, biographies and letters.

A biography of Kerouac's life is created in the novel by including descriptions of key events in his life. Aspects of his unpredictable personality are uncovered by his reactions to certain situations. The issues explored include Kerouac's strong ties to his mother, his unstable relationships with women and his inability to cope with fame. Kerouac battled with alcoholism throughout most of his life. Often it interfered with his writing, performances and relationships.⁶ His alcoholism is demonstrated by the character constantly being seen with a drink in his hand and his unruly and disruptive behaviour. Kerouac's disintegration over the course of the narratives reflects the downward spiral his life took over several decades. Sometimes he is portrayed as being as upbeat, young and happy as he was before he had completed his first novel and the term 'Beatnik' had been coined. In Lowell, for example, he is a fresh faced eighteen-year-old on his way to college. Throughout the novel, his personality and physical appearance change considerably, reflecting how his age and substance abuse over the years took their toll. Kerouac's difficulty with dealing with his fame is shown by his cynical and sometimes angry disposition.⁷ His depressive nature is also reflected in Stella, especially as she wanders around New York - high and happy one minute and

⁶ Turner, Steve *Jack Kerouac: Angelheaded Hipster*, New York, Viking, 1996, p. 166.

⁷ Turner, Steve *Jack Kerouac: Angelheaded Hipster*, New York, 1996, p. 167.

sad and lonely the next, for no apparent reason. At times in the novel Kerouac is in as disastrous a state physically and mentally as he was in the months leading up to his death.

The themes that are present in the novels and poetry of Jack Kerouac are also demonstrated in *My Witness Is the Empty Sky*. The author continually talks about modes of transport, clothing and food in much the same way that Kerouac liked to write about trains, canvas shoes and apple pie in his novels. Kerouac littered his writing with references to popular culture in order to establish a definitive atmosphere and time period for his work. *My Witness Is the Empty Sky* mentions clothing brands, make-up, musicians and candy bars to create a sense of place in each city that the author visits.

The religious and spiritual side of Jack Kerouac and how this is reflected in his writing and lifestyle is one theme that is also examined. Kerouac grew up a devout Catholic and evolved into a Buddhist and he talks about both religions extensively in his novels and poetry. The duality of his religious beliefs is shown by his references to Buddhist terminology and his drunken prayers for his long-dead brother, Gerard.

Dreams are also a huge feature of Kerouac's writing. *Book of Dreams* is a novel solely dedicated to descriptions of Kerouac's night visions. He also talked about dreams in his other novels and poems. Kerouac strongly believed that dreams were a way into the subconscious that could reveal aspects of the dreamer's personality and possibly their

future⁸. In *My Witness Is the Empty Sky*, the author mentions her dreams during various chapters as a way of expressing her feelings.

Kerouac's writing is strongly influenced by jazz music, whereby he sought to imitate the styles, rhythm and spontaneity of jazz in his poetry and prose.⁹ Music is an important component in *My Witness is the Empty Sky*. For example when Stella and Kerouac listen to a jazz poetry performance, the music changes the pace and style of the writing and overwhelms the characters. When they go dancing at a modern nightclub, the electronic music experienced in the nightclub is written about in the same manner that Kerouac wrote about a jazz performance, describing not only the sounds and rhythms, but how it makes you feel and react. Stella also constantly refers to her iPod, the sounds that it emits and how it helps her cope with her travels. In Mexico City she listens to a song by Bob Dylan which has references to Kerouac's book of poems *Mexico City Blues* and in New York she listens to jazz poetry recordings feature Kerouac. The iPod is omnipresent in the story, whether it is in Stella's ears or held by a fellow passenger on the subway in New York. This is significant because it demonstrates the importance and influence of music on Stella's generation, which escapes to an insular world of sound through tiny white earphones, rather than gathering in a bar to hear Charlie Parker.

The impact of the Beat Generation on modern society is explored in the novel. In every city, the author is confronted with a remnant of Beatnikdom. For example, Stella attends a poetry reading in Paris and

⁸ Nicosia, Gerald *Memory Babe: a critical biography of Jack Kerouac*, San Francisco, University of California Press, 1983.

⁹ Campbell, James *This is the Beat Generation*, London, Vintage, 2000, p. 19.

uncovers a group of writers who declare themselves to be a modernised, but ultimately more organised version of the Beat Generation. She also attends the Kerouac Conference in Lowell, MA and discovers just how marketable the Kerouac image has become when faced with tea towels, t-shirts and posters bearing his name. The chapter set in Lowell, touches on a controversial subject when it questions the handling of the Kerouac Estate by a group of relatives who are selling off mementoes and possessions one by one.

In each chapter, the influence of the city on the Beat Generation is explored. In this way, the city is presented as a character, showing how the location had a strong effect on the writers' work.¹⁰ For example, San Francisco's reputation as a city that fosters a bohemian and alternative lifestyle is displayed during the festival attended by the author and the descriptions of several eccentric characters that are encountered. The importance of 'the pad' in Beatnik culture is emphasised by the author's accommodations. In the bohemian and intellectual Berkeley, the author is forced to inhabit a completely 'uncool' and fake hotel, so unlike the hip and inspiring 'pads' of the Beat Generation.¹¹ When she finally makes it to the infamous Beat Hotel in Paris, she is faced with a four-star opulent establishment and moves herself into a roach-infested room to try and gather some sense of what it was like to live in Paris when Allen Ginsberg did.

Some of the major features of the 'scene' that existed in each city in Kerouac's lifetime are examined as the author visits the haunts of the

¹⁰ Meltzer, David *San Francisco Beat: Talking with the Poets* 2001, San Francisco, City Lights Books, preface.

¹¹ Morgan, Bill *The Beat Generation in San Francisco, A Literary Tour* 2003, San Francisco, City Lights Books, p. 162-163.

Beat Generation and describes the significant events that took place there and what has become of the buildings. By slipping in and out of time and space, information about each city's layout and history is revealed. There is a sense of loss as Stella and Kerouac loiter around the city looking for his old friends and hangouts. It is almost understandable when he lashes out from the frustration of finding them long gone and that a miscellaneous building has been erected in its place. In this way, Kerouac and the reader are reminded that he is a ghost, that there is nothing but the words he left behind. It is Stella who still clings to the notion that there is something of the Beat Generation left in the world and who struggles to bring its essence to the surface.

Various quotes from writers and personalities of the Beat Generation are used to give structure to each chapter and provide insights into the topics discussed. Poets such as Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Kenneth Rexroth are quoted in reference to the atmosphere of San Francisco and the 'scene'. Quotes taken from interviews with William Burroughs add depth to descriptions of his life in Tangier and Mexico City.

My Witness Is the Empty Sky is, above all, a love story. It is the story of a young woman so obsessed with a particular genre of literature, that she travels around the world trying to discover the meaning behind the words. A true bibliophile, she is more excited about browsing through a Left Bank bookstore than ascending the Eiffel Tower. Her friendship with Kerouac is based on her research into his life and the kind of friendships he had with many other women. The author often plays second fiddle to Kerouac; it is she who follows him around the city, letting him lead her from one site to the next. She is

not completely reliant on him and is frustrated when he pops up at the strangest moments to distract her or cause trouble. At the end of some chapters, she becomes so frustrated and disgusted with his behaviour that she finally walks away. However, it is apparent that having Jack Kerouac pop up in her life is a pattern and it is not surprising when she goes to the next city and begins to follow him again. The author's obsession with Kerouac means that she will never be rid of him and that she will continue to learn from him, as he acts as a kind of guide to another time and place for which she was never present.